Chapter 3 looked at different ways of making decisions, and how a society based on direct democracy might look. This chapter provides a detailed guide for using consensus in your group. The tools described below are based on decades of experience in groups such as housing and workers' co-operatives. With commitment, they really do work and making decisions by consensus can be the bedrock of transforming our world and our relationships with each other.

**what is consensus decision making?**

Consensus is a decision-making process that works creatively to include all the people making the decision. Instead of simply voting for an item, and letting the majority of the group get their way, the group is committed to finding solutions that everyone can live with. This ensures that everyone’s opinions, ideas and reservations are taken into account. But consensus is more than just a compromise. It is a process that can result in surprising and creative solutions – often better than the original suggestions.

At the heart of consensus is a respectful dialogue between equals, helping groups to work together to meet both the individuals’ and the group’s needs. It’s about how to work with each other rather than “for” or “against” each other.

Making decisions by consensus is based on trust and openness – this means learning to openly express both our desires (what we’d like to see happening), and our needs (what we have to see happen in order to be able to support a decision). If everyone is able to trust each other and talk openly, then the group will have the information it requires to take everyone’s positions into account and to come up with a solution that everyone can support.

It may take time to learn how to distinguish between our desires and needs: after all most of us are more used to decision making where one wins and the other loses. In this kind of adversarial decision making we are often forced to take up a strategic position of presenting our desires as needs.
Conditions for good consensus

For good consensus building to be possible a few conditions need to be met:

| Commitment to Reaching Consensus on all Decisions: Consensus requires commitment, patience, tolerance and a willingness to put the group first. It can be damaging if individuals secretly want to return to majority voting, just waiting for the chance to say ‘I told you it wouldn’t work.’ |
| Active Participation: If we want a decision we all can agree on, we all need to play an active role in the decision-making. |
| Clear Process: Everyone needs to share an understanding of how consensus is being used. There are lots of variations of the consensus process, so even if people are experienced in using consensus they may use it differently to you! Explain the process at the beginning of the meeting. |
| Good Facilitation: Appoint facilitators to help your large group meeting run more smoothly. The facilitators are there to ensure that the group works harmoniously, creatively and democratically. |
| Common Goal: Everyone at the meeting needs to be united in clear common goal — whether it’s the desire to take action at a specific event, or a shared ethos. Being clear about the shared goal helps to keep a meeting focused and united. |
| Trust and Respect: We all need to trust that everyone shares our commitment, and respects our opinions and equal rights. |

Figure 4.1 Conditions for good consensus

Source: Seeds for Change

The consensus process

The dialogue that helps us to find common ground and respect our differences can take different formats. Some groups have developed detailed procedures; in other
groups the process may be more organic. What process you use depends on the size of the group and how well people know each other. Below we outline a process for groups no larger than 15–20 people. Later on we discuss the spokescouncil process, which works for groups of hundreds, and even thousands, of people.

Dealing with disagreement in consensus

Consensus aims to reach a decision that everyone can live with. So what can be done when we need to reach agreement and we seem to be poles apart? To find a solution that works for everyone we have to understand the underlying problems that lead to the differing points of view and then come up with ways of addressing them: there are often specific problems causing the failure to reach agreement. These can often be dealt with by facilitation and are explored later in this chapter.

For those times when there is continued disagreement over a decision that needs to be taken, consider the following options:

![Figure 4.2 A model for small group consensus](source: Seeds for Change.)
The major objection (block or veto): Using your veto will stop the proposal going ahead, so think carefully before doing it. But don’t be afraid to veto when it’s relevant. A veto means: ‘If this decision went ahead I could not be part of this project’. If someone expresses a major objection, the group discards the proposal and starts working on a new one. People often ask what happens if the rest of the group is unwilling to respect the veto. This is a difficult situation where the group needs to decide whether the proposal is so important to them that they will risk the person who objects leaving the group. The ideal is never to be in a situation where a major objection is being raised in the first place. The key to consensus building is to identify areas people feel strongly about early on in the process, so that any proposals already take them into account.

The minor objection (stand aside): There will be times when you want to object, but not veto. In those situations you can ‘stand aside’. Standing aside registers your dissent, and says clearly that you won’t help implement the proposal. A stand aside means: ‘I personally can’t do this, but I won’t stop others from doing it.’ The person standing aside is not responsible for the consequences, but also isn’t stopping the group from going ahead with the decision.

Agree to disagree: The group decides that no agreement can be reached on this issue. Imagine what will happen in six months, a year or five years if you don’t agree. Is the decision still so important?

The Fridge: Put the decision on ice, and come back to it in an hour, a day or a week. Quite often when people have had a chance to cool off and think it through things can look quite different.

Backup options: Some groups have fallback options when no agreement can be reached.

(a) Allow the person most concerned to make the decision.
(b) Put all the possibilities into a hat and pull one out. Agree in advance on this solution.
(c) Some groups have majority voting as a backup, often only after a second or third attempt at reaching consensus, and requiring an overwhelming majority such as 80 or 90 per cent.

Leaving the group: If one person continually finds him/herself at odds with the rest of the group, it may be time to think about the reasons for this. Is this really the right group to be in? A group may also ask a member to leave.
Facilitating the consensus process

Facilitation helps a group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting. Facilitators are essentially helpers. They look after the structure of the meeting, making sure everyone has an opportunity to contribute, and that decisions are reached.

Facilitation is a vital role that needs to be filled at every meeting. In small groups this function may be shared by everyone or rotated informally. Difficult meetings or meetings with a larger number of participants (more than eight or ten people) should always have clearly designated facilitators. However, all members of the meeting should always feel responsible for the progress of the meeting, and help the facilitator if necessary.

Box 4.2 A Facilitator’s Skills and Qualities

- Little emotional investment in the issues discussed. If this becomes difficult, step out of role and let someone else facilitate.
- Energy and attention for the job at hand.
- Understanding of tasks for the meeting as well as long-term goals of the group.
- Good listening skills including strategic questioning to be able to understand everyone’s viewpoint properly.
- Confidence that good solutions will be found and consensus can be achieved.
- Assertiveness that is not overbearing – know when to intervene decisively and give some direction to the meeting.
- Respect for all participants and interest in what each individual has to offer.
- Clear thinking – observation of the whole group.
- Attend both to the content of the discussion and the process. How are people feeling?
Depending on the group a facilitator might:

- Help the group decide on a structure and process for the meeting and keep to it.
- Keep the meeting focused on one item at a time until decisions are reached.
- Regulate the flow of discussion – drawing out quiet people and limiting over-talking.
- Clarify and summarise points, test for consensus and formalise decisions.
- Help the group in dealing with conflicts.

**Facilitation roles**

One facilitator is rarely enough for a meeting. Depending on the size of the group and the length of the meeting some or all of the following roles may be used:

- The facilitator helps the group decide on and keep to the structure and process of the meeting. This means running through the agenda point by point, keeping the focus of the discussion on one item at a time, regulating the flow of the discussion and making sure everyone participates. The facilitator also clarifies and summarises points and tests for consensus.
- The co-facilitator provides support such as writing up ideas and proposals on a flip chart for all to see or watching out for rising tension, lack of focus, flagging energy. They can also step in and facilitate if the facilitator is flagging, or feels a need to take a position on an issue.
- Keeping a list of speakers and making sure they are called to speak in turn can either be taken on by the co-facilitator or it can be a separate role.
- The minute taker notes down proposals, decisions and action points for future reference. They also draw attention to incomplete decisions – for example who is going to contact so and so, and when.
- The timekeeper makes sure each agenda item gets enough time for discussion, and that the meeting finishes at the agreed time.
- The doorkeeper meets and greets people on the way into the meeting, checks that everyone knows what the meeting is for, and hands out any documents such as minutes from the last meeting. This makes new people feel welcome, and brings latecomers up to speed without interrupting the meeting.

**Common problems and how to overcome them**

These two examples show how important it is to get to the bottom of the underlying issues when things get tricky in a meeting. Develop your ability to spot problems, the underlying reasons for them, and how to deal with them. The more trust and
understanding there is in a group the easier it will become to overcome problems. Facilitation can help supply the tools to avoid problems in the first place and help deal with them creatively if they do occur.

**Box 4.3a Problem 1**

Tom, with lots of experience, confidence and a loud voice, is talking all the time and dominating the meeting. Hardly anyone else gets a chance to speak.

**Underlying causes**

- A lack of understanding of the consensus process on behalf of Tom coupled with an unwillingness of the rest of the group to challenge his behaviour.

**Possible solutions**

The facilitator can equalise speaking time by using tools such as:

- Introduce a go-round – each person speaks in turn for a set amount of time.
- At the beginning of the meeting set a limit on how many times a person can speak.
- Pro-actively ask other people for their opinion: “Thank you, Tom, for your great ideas. What do other people think?”

**Box 4.3b Problem 2**

People are coming up with lots of ideas, but the discussion is going nowhere. People keep going off on tangents.

**Underlying causes**

- Lack of structure and focus for the discussion.
- Weak facilitation.

**Possible solutions**

The discussion can be moved on from its creative phase to making decisions:

- Write all ideas up on a flip chart for all to see.
- Discuss one idea at a time, recording pros and cons for each one.
- When people bring up tangential issues, record them for discussion later. Avoid getting sidetracked.
- Check if the facilitator needs a break or support.
Here is a selection of tools you can use at various stages of a meeting to make it efficient and enjoyable for all. It is always a good idea to explain to people what tools you are using and why.

(a) At the beginning of the meeting

- Consensus training: Running pre-meeting ‘introduction to consensus’ sessions can make meetings more inclusive for everyone, and avoid conflict that arises from a misunderstanding of the process.
- Setting up the meeting venue: It’s important that the space, and the way you use the space, doesn’t isolate or alienate anybody. Is everyone able to hear and see clearly? Some rooms have very bad acoustics that require people to shout to be heard. Others have fixed seating or columns that restrict people’s view and their ability to participate. Is the venue accessible to everyone?
- Group agreements and ground rules: Agree at the beginning of the meeting on how the meeting will be run. This prevents a lot of problems from occurring in the first place. It also makes it easier for the facilitators to challenge disruptive behaviour, as they can refer back to ‘what we all agreed’. Possible ground rules might include: using consensus, hand signals, not interrupting each other, active participation, challenging oppressive behaviour, respecting opinions, sticking to agreed time limits, and switching off mobile phones.
- Clear agendas: These can help make a meeting flow more easily. Sort out the agenda at the start of the meeting or even, with the participation of the group, in advance. Be realistic about what can be achieved in the time you’ve got, and decide which items can be dealt with at a later meeting. Set time limits on each agenda item to help the meeting end on time. Make sure that everyone has an up to date copy of the agenda or write it up on a flip chart for everyone to see.
- Using hand signals: These can help meetings run more smoothly and helps the facilitators spot emerging agreements. It is important to explain what hand signals you will be using at the start of the meeting to avoid confusion!

(b) When making a decision

Not every tool is suitable for every stage of the consensus process. Think carefully about when you would use which tool and why.
making decisions by consensus

- **Go-rounds**: Everyone takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people. Go-rounds help to gather opinions, feelings and ideas as well as slow down the discussion and improve listening. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.

- **Idea storm**: Ask people to call out all their ideas as fast as possible – without censoring them. All ideas are welcome – the crazier the better and helps people to be inspired by each other. Have one or two note takers to write all ideas down where everyone can see them. Make sure there is no discussion or comment on others’ ideas at this stage. Structured thinking and organising can come afterwards.

- **Show of hands or straw poll**: An obvious but effective way of prioritising items or gauging group opinion. Make sure people understand this is not voting, but to help the facilitators spot emerging agreements.

- **Clear process**: Used when dealing with multiple proposals. For example, if you plan to consider ideas in turn, let people know they’ll all be considered and given equal time. Otherwise some people may well be unco-operative because they can’t clearly see that there is time set aside to talk about their idea and may feel like they’re being ignored. If you’re putting some ideas to

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**Figure 4.3 Consensus hand signals**

*Source: Seeds for Change.*

‘I agree’ or ‘Sounds good!’
Silent Hand clapping. Wave your hands with your fingers pointing upwards to indicate your agreement. This gives a very helpful visual overview of what people think. It also saves time as it avoids everyone having to say ‘I’d just like to add that I agree with...’.
one side, after a prioritisation exercise for example, you might like to ensure their ‘owners’ have agreed and understand the reasons why.

- Pros and cons: Got several ideas and can’t decide which one to go for? Simply list the benefits and drawbacks of each idea and compare the results. This can be done in a full group, in pairs or small groups, working on the pros and cons of one option and reporting back to the group.

- ‘Plus-Minus-Implications’: A variation of the simple ‘pros and cons’ technique. It will help you decide between a number of options by examining them one by one. Create a simple table with three columns titled Plus, Minus, and Implications, and write ‘positives’, ‘negatives’, and ‘implications’ in each.

- Breaks: Taking a break can revitalise a meeting, reduce tension, and give people time to reflect on proposals and decisions. Plan a 15 minute break at least every two hours and take spontaneous breaks if the meeting gets too heated or attention is flagging.

(c) At the end of a meeting

- Evaluation and constructive feedback: Evaluation allows us to learn from our experiences. It should be a regular part of our meetings and workshops as it gives us the chance for honest feedback on the process and content of the event, allowing us to improve in the future. Everyone who participates in an event should be encouraged to take part in its evaluation.

**consensus in large groups – the spokescouncil**

When making decisions in a large group there is a tendency to have one large meeting with hundreds of people. One of the problems with this format is that the large majority of people do not have a chance to speak due to time constraints. Instead it is usually dominated by a few confident people. This is not a good starting point for reaching consensus, which depends on mutual understanding and trust. Good consensus building is based on working in small groups where everyone contributes to the discussion.

The spokescouncil was developed to address this problem. It enables large numbers of people to work together as democratically as possible, allowing the maximum number of opinions and ideas to be heard in an efficient way. Many groups such as social centres and large workers’ co-operatives use this process successfully as well as peace, anti-nuclear and environmental movements around the world.
How a spokescouncil works

In a spokescouncil the meeting breaks up into smaller groups to enable everyone to express their views and take part in discussions. Small groups can be either based on working groups, in regional groupings based on shared political analysis, or be entirely random. People in each small group discuss the issues and come up with proposals and concerns.

Each group sends a delegate (or *spoke*) to the spokescouncil meeting, where all the spokes present the proposals and concerns of their group. The spokes then come up with proposals that they think might be acceptable to everyone and check back with their groups before a decision is taken.

For a spokescouncil to work effectively the role of the spoke needs to be clearly defined. A group can choose to use the spoke as a voice – feeding back to the group the collective, agreed thoughts. Or the small group might empower their spoke to make certain decisions based on their knowledge of the small group. Being the spoke is not easy – it carries significant responsibility. You might like to rotate the role from meeting to meeting or agenda item to agenda item. It also helps to have two spokes, one presenting the viewpoints and proposals of their small group, the other to take notes of what other groups have to say. This helps to ensure that ideas don’t get lost or misrepresented in the transmission between small groups and the spokescouncil.

Spokescouncils require good facilitation by a team of at least three facilitators, which work well together and who are skilled at synthesising proposals.

This process works regardless of whether everyone involved is in the same location or geographically dispersed. Where small groups are based in different places, the spokescouncil either involves a lot of travel for the spokes or the spokes communicate via telephone conferences and chat rooms.
If all the people involved in making the decision are together in the same place, it works well if groups sit in a cluster behind their spoke during the spokescouncil. Groups can hear what is being discussed and give immediate feedback to their spoke. This can make the spokescouncil more accountable and reduce the need for repeating information.

Variations

If the issue impacts strongly on the needs of the people involved, then an additional step can be built in where small groups give information on their particular needs via the spokescouncil before starting to gather ideas. When there are just a few people with strongly opposing views that seemingly can’t be resolved within the format of the spokescouncil we have successfully used the “back of the barn” technique. This involves those with strong views having a separate meeting with the aim of working out a proposal that they can all agree to. This definitely benefits from an
experienced facilitator who can help people express and listen to each other’s concerns and needs.

**Making consensus work with thousands of people**

The spokescouncil itself is limited by the number of spokes that can have a meaningful exchange of information and discussion in the spokescouncil. In our experience a spokescouncil becomes much more difficult when more than 20 small groups are represented. If the maximum size of each small group is 20 people as well, this gives a natural limit of about 400 people for which the spokescouncil works.

To make consensus decisionmaking possible with thousands of people, peace and anti-nuclear movements have developed a three tier system, where small groups are affiliated in clusters who then send spokes to an overall spokescouncil.

The key to making this work is to make decisions at the most local level possible. Not every decision needs to be taken by everyone. The spokescouncil should be reserved for only the most important decisions, generally at a policy level. It is often the facilitators that will spot proposals that do not need to be decided in the whole group. For example, discussion around the wording of a press release should take place in the small working group that is actually writing it. This group can consult with everyone else for their ideas and preferences, but this is different from attempting to reach a decision with everyone. Consensus is based on trust and good will, even more so in a large group.

**Conclusion**

Consensus is about participation and equalising power. It can also be a very powerful process for building communities and empowering individuals. Despite sometimes taking longer to achieve, consensus can actually save time and stress, because the group doesn’t have to keep revisiting past decisions – they were fully supported at the time they were made. Don’t be discouraged if the going gets tough. For most of us consensus is a completely new way of negotiating and making decisions – it takes time to unlearn the patterns of behaviour we have been brought up to accept as the norm. Consensus gets much easier with practice, and its true potential is often only recognised after a difficult decision has been reached in a way that everyone is happy with.
Seeds for Change are a UK based collective of activist trainers providing training for grassroots campaign groups. They also develop resources on consensus, facilitation and taking action, all of which are available on their website www.seedsforchange.org.uk

resources

Books
Try your local library first – they are generally quite happy to order or even buy books for you. If you decide to buy a book, get it from one of the radical/independent bookshops – they all do mail order! In the UK try News from Nowhere in Liverpool (0151 708 7270) or Housmans Bookshop in London (020 7278 4474).

CrimethInc. (2000). Days of War Nights of Love – CrimethInc for Beginners; Demon Box Collective. (A book of thoughts, inspirations and texts – read this if you want to think more about the issues raised in this chapter.)
Freeman, J. The Tyranny of Structurelessness, www.struggle.ws/anarchism/pdf/booklets/structurelessness.html (Pamphlet about informal hierarchies in small groups.)
Ward, C. (1988). Anarchy in Action. London: Freedom Press. (Many of the ideas in these chapters have been developed and used extensively by anarchists. This is one of many books providing an introduction.)
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Werkstatt für Gewaltfreie Aktion Baden (2004). *Konsens – Handbuch zur Gewaltfreien Entscheidungsfindung*. Gewaltfrei: Leben Leben. (Probably the most current and comprehensive book on consensus decision making – includes exercises, detailed descriptions and exercises; in German; buero.karlsruhe@wfga.de.)

**Websites**
- Blatant Incitement Project www.eco-action.org/blinc
- Groundswell www.groundswell.org.uk
- Participatory Budgeting www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk
- Rant Collective www.rantcollective.net
- Seeds for Change www.seedsforchange.org.uk
- Skillsharing www.skillsharing.org.uk